

# Out of the Comfort Zone, Into the Combat Zone

*Instructor jumps at chance to help train Iraqi noncommissioned officers*

by Louis A. Arana-Barradas  
photo by Master Sgt. Lance Cheung

## Career field Facts

**AFSC:** Special duty identifier 8T000, professional military education instructor

**Assigned:** 647

**Duties:** Special duty assignment. Conducts professional military education programs for Airmen and noncommissioned officers. Also provides management consultant services. Plans, organizes and directs PME programs and activities and requirements for education, facilities, space, equipment, visual aids and supplies. Develops and revises curriculums.

**Civilian application:** Any educational vocation.

**T**ech. Sgt. Rich Parsons was excited when he got orders to Iraq. Not the typical reaction most servicemembers have to such news.

But this was a sweet deal, the professional military education instructor said. He'd be doing exactly what he did at Mountain Home Air Force Base, Idaho — training future noncommissioned officers. Plus, it was a unique opportunity for travel in a career field where people rarely deploy.

"Besides, I'd have a hand in helping shape the new Iraqi army," he said. "And I'd get to do my job in a hostile environment." To him, that part alone was worth the trip.

Sergeant Parsons also knew he'd be in a place much different than the high desert plains he'd gotten used to at Mountain Home. There, he was a PME flight instructor at the Gunfighter Airman Leadership School. It's a great place to work, he said, but he enjoys the challenges outside of normal duty.

A deployment junkie, he needed

some excitement. A trip to Iraq was the answer. So in February 2004, he packed his bags and headed for the war zone.

Sergeant Parsons knew he was one of 30 Air Force PME instructors deployed to Iraq, but he found out he'd be working for the U.S. Army with Army, Navy and Marine Corps instructors. His welcome to Baghdad — a rocket propelled grenade attack.

"We didn't get hit. But we were ducking and diving and doing all that stuff," he said. "People were freaking out." At Balad Air Base, "we took mortar hits every night."

For four months Kirkush Military Training Base, northeast of Baghdad, was home. Saddam Hussein built it as a showcase because it was close to the Iranian border. But no Iraqis ever occupied it. So, the instructors moved into barracks meant to house the Republican Guard.

"They weren't in the greatest shape, but it beat living in tents," Sergeant Parsons said.

Within days, the Americans began training at the Iraqi army's equivalent of a noncommissioned officers academy. The training was all U.S. Army, and the instructors taught the curriculum right out of the Army's primary leadership development course. Basically, the Americans were teaching Iraqis squad leader tactics. The first group of students would, in turn, make up the core of the instructor cadre that would take over the teaching duties at the school.

But it wasn't all smooth sailing. Airmen, Soldiers, Sailors and Marines all have their own way of doing things. So the challenge was to adapt to the Army way of doing things. Sergeant Parsons said it wasn't easy. But the Airmen soon learned to "stay in their lane," he said. And they fought to prove wrong the Army stereotypes of them.

"The Soldiers didn't think we could do physical training, or run," he said. "But we proved we could stay right up there with them."

Eventually, the instructors meshed into a team. But most trainees couldn't speak English, and none of the instructors spoke Arabic, Farsi or Kurdish. Some recruits couldn't even speak to or understand each other. So Jordanian military officers and noncommissioned officers worked hand-in-hand with the Americans. They interpreted and taught weapon classes. They also taught the drill and ceremonial parts of the course, since both countries use the British system. In some cases, students acted as interpreters for classmates.

"The first week was hectic," Sergeant Parsons said. "We weren't real sure at the beginning if everything was going to work out."

But it did. After six weeks, the Americans had adapted. The cadre made changes and tweaked the course. They dropped parts and added some.

And they got to know their students.

The Iraqis are not unlike students he trains at home, Sergeant Parsons said. Some joined for the salary. Others wanted to support their families. The best part, he said, was that all the troops wanted to be there. They wanted to be part of the army so they could help protect their country.

"And they were there by choice — not because they were forced to join," he said.

Sergeant Parsons made Iraqi friends. They communicated with sign language, broken English and photos. Sitting on blankets, they'd

**Tech. Sgt. Rich Parsons inspects students** before a retreat ceremony outside Mountain Home's Gunfighter Airman Leadership School. He said serving in Iraq was an eye-opening experience and a unique opportunity to be a part of history.

## Tech. Sgt. Rich Parsons

Professional military education flight instructor, 366th Mission Support Squadron, Mountain Home Air Force Base, Idaho  
**Years in Air Force:** 12 1/2

**Hometown:** Durham, N.C.

**Reason for joining:** To do something constructive and gain direction and structure in his life.

**Assignments:** Andrews Air Force Base, Md.; Spangdahlem Air Base, Germany; Mountain Home.

**Coming up:** Wants to become a chief master sergeant one day and have an impact on the future of the Air Force. "I want to be the best I can be, the best at what I do and make a difference."

**The best thing about the job:** "That I have a hand in developing and molding first-line supervisors who, in turn, influence the first-term Airmen they supervise."

talk about many things, especially their families.

"I learned that family is important to Iraqis," he said. "It was an awesome experience."

And he heard horror stories, too. One student told him Saddam's sons killed his entire family. Another saw Saddam's troops drag people out of their homes to shoot them in the streets.

"The fact they joined the army showed just how brave these men are," Sergeant Parsons said.

New recruits are motivated and patriotic, he said. One arrived for training with a bullet still lodged in his infected foot. After an operation, doctors told him he couldn't go through the class. But he came back. The day the first class graduated, there he was, ready to start the next one.

Graduation day was a good day for instructors and students, Sergeant Parsons said.

"That was a proud day for all of us. We saw that our work paid off. And it felt good to see the Iraqi troops get their stripes and move on to help their country," he said. "But I was only part of that effort. There were 44 other Airmen who assisted in this part of Air Force and Iraqi history. I thank all my joint service 'brothers' for their sacrifices as well."

Sergeant Parsons returned to Mountain Home in June. He went to Iraq, he said, to leave an impression on the troops he trained. But it was the students who left a lasting impression on him. ☺

